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When timbers tremored in the Cary Mine

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WHEN TIMBERS TREMORED IN THE CARY MINE

By

Paul Leonard Zarzyski

B.S., University of Wisconsin--Stevens Point, 1973


Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

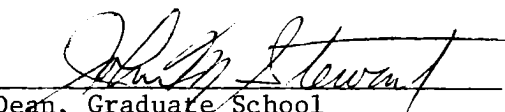
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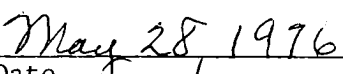
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For My Mom & Dad, Dee & Len Zarzyski

"Was the past broken off from the present?...
or did that vein of iron hold all the
generations together?"

Ellen Glasgow

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Some of the poems included in this volume have been published, some in earlier versions, in the following magazines and papers:

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IRON IN THE VEINS

GOING BACK HOME

This morning the mountains smoulder,
cold after a warm rain.
Haze taxies your plane
to the gate. You wave like rodeo queens
you saw, West for the first time.

Back home, my hands chill
a cup of hot coffee
you cooked in Noni's old pot,
and the saucy smell of your pasta
stirs from the burner.

Lids still plink in the cupboards
on pickles and plums you canned.
When another jet climbs the corridor
behind my back, the kitchen shudders
and I know that I am alone.

--For My Mother

FIRST MASS WITH NONI

Her brass bed squeaks
like footsteps on hard-packed snow,
then the clank of iron lids,
the hardwood smell in an old house,
smoke and the purr of four cats.
Forty below at five a.m.
glazes the inside panes.

Time to unlock the church doors.
The color of morning drifts
silver from every chimney,
streetlamps hum,
and tire chains on the milk truck
ring from the other side of town.
We climb the steep hill to Saint Mary's.

In the empty choir loft, Sister Cecilia's
ivory-tusk fingers key the organ
to an eerie pitch. Noni prays in Italian
and vigil flames sway when the wind howls.
This early, the stained glass windows
black, in the smell of candle wax
the church is too alone, too cold for God.

TESTIMONY

I witness this at seven:
Two shots shatter the skull,
capped bottles exploding in dump fires.
I am camouflaged, crud-faced,
peeking from behind the burnt can pile.

The policeman thumbs the hammer
twice, the collie flinches.
Her tail is the first to die.
She wriggles in the ash,
the limp tongue spilling with her blood.

I witness this at seven,
quivering behind the burnt can pile,
arms locked around Smokey's neck,
my eyes glowering wet
in the sun, two brass .38 hulls.

The policeman thumbs the hammer
twice, the collie flinches.
My dog licks her eyes shut,
and bluebottle flies buzz
like deaf women pray in church.

I witness this at seven,
in search of soapbox wheels.
I find instead this desire to kill,
and leave the bloated cop to rot
behind the burnt can pile.

MY FATHER'S SHEETS

When he woke with powder headaches,
the quake of caving rock,
my father's wet eyes stared dim,
like miners' lamps in deep shafts.
His fingers, thick and red as dynamite,
were always stiff from shifts
and double shifts on pick-ax and shovel.

Once he came home hurt
his fear, hidden with the stitches
strung through his chin hairs.
Only way to kill a Pole, he'd kid
cut off his head, then hide it.

The mines were like the war
he'd never talk about,
and mother says today
his pores still sweat the iron
buried in nightmares of bleeding ore.

CUTTING WOOD WITH DAD FOR THE BASEMENT STOVE...

I remember those hardy Sundays,
the sheen of a stiff frost
in an eight o'clock sun, and coffee
brewed after communion; Uncle Hank,
Italian friends and family, sharp cheese
with bread for breakfast, first wine
poured from dusty gallon jugs,
and a dozen hardwood cords.
When the sawrig skirled
in early autumn, I stacked the heavy chunks
and chopped brittle limbs for kindling
with an ax Uncle whittled me from oak.

Those were the years
he drove snow plow, the orange Oshkosh,
and I waited for winter and rides.
His hands, wide and mapped like maple leaves
on the blade levers,
he banked the new snow ten feet high
along the roadsides. I played until dusk
in forts he dug after work. And weekends,
if the North quit blowing
storms in our faces for days,
we hunted snowshoe rabbits
I jumped from spruce and pine brush.

And I remember that Sunday Hank died.
Noni cried when she fired the stove
and you pulled first-frost mushrooms, Dad,
off moldy stumps, black ash and oak
he left behind. The sawrig
sold to someone I didn't know,
and that year axes rusted red
as centipedes under the woodpile's last tier.
Storms from the North struck without notice
like ghosts. And the man who drove
the Oshkosh wore black,
a wool cap just like Uncle Hank's.

THE PRICE OF GOLD IN IDAHO CITY

Every week the beer truck comes to town
another building burns.
Drunks with oil stoves, a poor mix,
like natives and hippies.
At this end-of-the-road town
the snowplow turns
back down the mountain
and mongrels die of old age
asleep in the streets.

We stop for a beer
and people ask where we're from
like they mean, which planet?
An Indian hounds me all day,
"how many bars in this town?"
I tell him three, for the third time,
in the third bar. He looks worried.
And a drunk miner splutters through his chaw,
something about another vein.

Outside this City, a tourist sign
colors its history of color,
boom, rich mines and sluice.
So much gold, they measured it by pints.
And the inside story's told best
by urinals, so high,
you have to perch on your toes.
Men were big alright, and women
rare as fist-size nuggets.

The miner spits his words
again. A grimace from a powder headache
pouches his eyes, like gold-
laced quartz in a rawhide face.
This time, "blasted a new vein...
come to town for a good mucker."
Another beer and I'll take the job,
I think. Work like a sturdy old cradle
with a long tom, down the stream bottoms.
(next page, new stanza)

But outside, the thwack of someone old
splitting wood, keeps the slow beat
of this heartwood town. I see
a worn woman sanding down
edges of a hollowed meat-cutting block,
gently, as if she knows
suffering of flesh and bone.
And those unmarked mounds of placer
hunch like graves against a gray sky.

--For Clay Morgan

LOST

The trail is a woman who leaves me,
drops me cold
and the only way to go is down.
Longer nights bring bear
to this deep canyon,
and the scent of my fear hangs in the trees,
thick as old-man's-beard.

Lodgepole squeak in the updrafts
like voices of ghost miners,
and the same abandoned shaft
follows me, one dark eye
in the mountain's skull.
Then the air sits thick with silence,
a cougar listens for prey

and a rabbit wheezes in the snare.
I know the gutshot buck
runs downhill,
wounded ducks will dive
to die in the bottom snags.
When mice grow fat on my bones,
she will be lost forever.

WHEN TIMBERS TREMORED IN THE CARY MINE...

blood mixed with iron in the veins,
news flashed, "cave-in--level 36",
and the cage surfaced without dad.
Mom prayed
he'd taken graveyard for a friend,
whispered, "Leonard, my Leonard"
through a mile of dirt and hematite.
Her damp cheeks glowed red
as his iron-stained pocket watch,
and the brown beads stretched across her lap
like a string of ore cars.
Together we swallowed Hail Marys
until our father came home exhausted,
his eyes, puffy as grape ore,
still raising the dead from their graves.

HAY BALES AND CROSSCUT SPRAY

THE FARMERS AT SMITTY'S BAR AND ANTIQUES

I find them barely living, fossils
bogged down in a small-town saloon.
Time has beaten them toothless
and their flesh sags
like warped barns into the land.
When they squeeze my arm
their hard stories churn, always
bumper crops and Holstein herds.
Today they sold the lower forty,
rusty milk cans and the cream separator.

They are like the old wood wheels
entangled in roots of abandoned hay,
their furrowed faces, stubbled
gray as lichen-sprawls on rotting oak.
With eyes like rusted axle lugs,
they gaze into their yellow crystal balls,
schooners of headless beer,
and the memories swell like wet wheel hubs
when spokes crumble away from rims.
Tomorrow, the homestead, for a single room in town.

SHE DRIFTS FROM THE SKY LIKE WINTER

Snow flares in the low beams,
the night flies apart
with stars. This first storm
whitewashes the North,
and cold bones of the plank bridge
creak with icy age.

We park and shuffle our way
over the river. Brush-tipped
rapids shellac the rocks,
and popple saplings bend
their backs to the wind.

The river growls and sumacs clatter
together like teeth. We move
in the blue kaleidoscope of a blizzard
and new love, exciting
as moonlight on fresh snow.

--For Charlotte

WHEN THE GEESE FLEW, THE COWS WERE MILKED EARLY

On a dark October morning
a jack-o-lantern barn is lit
in the distance, a gap-toothed row of windows
glows orange at four a.m.
Arne calls the cows in, a hundred
Holsteins he knows all by name.

He goes from stall to stall,
tosses fodder,
washes off their heavy udders.
Inside the warm smell of raw milk and manure,
a slow heartland pulse
drums from the automatic milkers.

At dawn we climb the silo. A south wind
all night with no moon
keeps the geese down on Lake Superior.
We know the sound
of wind when honkers squawk,
horizons stitched thin with wings.

We see the long stalks ahead,
together through hay and oats, those days
we'll crawl in a muddy November snow,
and that long wait again until fall
when we fill our game bags, fat
as Daisy Mae and Sassy.

--For Arnold in Saxon, Wis.

DREAM SONG FOR THE GIRL WITH THE LONG HAIR

She gallops a palomino stallion,
a sleek wind
bows the long strands of her hair
and the shrill sound of a violin
waves on this eerie horizon.

She comes in a flurry of hooves,
a whirlwind of golden hair and heat.
With the delicate touch
holding her reins of love
and death, she is gone.

--For Jaimie

THE PIG ROAST

There is something cold about the stench
of slaughter even though the blood can
burn your hands.

In Ronan, we buy the pig,
a weaner, scalded pink
skin, slick as the ball
end of a hambone. So gross
we take pictures, Quinton
kissing it like a baby,
and give it a name.
But when the coals are white
we slop his ass with sauce
and lower him into the pit.

And there, in the glower of heat,
I see that white horse again
running the road to Ronan,
a deep slit in his brisket
opens and closes
with each stride, like lips
spewing blood, like a fiery gash
in the earth's chest
fumes a dark red voice.

--For Tom, Maggie & Q

THE NIGHT THE DEVIL DANCED ON ME

A werewolf moon glares
from the top row of bleachers,
a horned owl with only one eye.
In the black hole of chute number 8
Lonewolf waits, an ugly horse
the cowboys say, with a notched right ear
and dirty suck-back ways.

When a sluggish Montana sun goes down,
a crowd packs home its cheers,
the squeak of warm rosin and leather
echoes in the arena, and nostrils
bellow the horse's hot snort.
I wedge my hand in the riggin', feel the bind
hard as the bronc's rawhide muscles below me.

Above the chute, a jury of broken cowboys
against dusk, silhouettes of crooked limbs
in an old orchard, and heartwood faces
that stare, like kids look into the gullet
of a homestead well. I call for the gate.
Hinges shriek and sand hisses against the chutes
with every kick. The moon dives in a dirty sky.

Lonewolf flings me down, throws
a dozen shadows at the fence. I'm hung,
under the belly, dragged in a flurry
of hooves and spurs, claws in the dark.
The ground is a black thunder cloud
and I feel my chaps swoop
around me like wings of a huge bird.

THE QUEEN OF COUNTRY-WESTERN

Your voice runs warm through the Rockies.
Each song, a mountain heartbeat,
reddens Montana's bluest cold
and rouses in dens of bear.
From Yellowstone's Cinnabars to the Castles and Crazies,
your music waves from tree to tree, like notes
that pitch in a ribbon of hills.

Truckers veer their 18-wheelers to routes
they fuel with tunes..."on the top of the world
looking down on creation." You sing
and I trail your lyric-
fresh tracks in new snow. I know
the tempo of every verse,
like the warm rhythm of a bareback horse.

I stake a claim on every beat. Listen
to the wind keep time with eagles' wings,
the echo of your harmony. I hear a coyote
wail from the throat of the steel guitar
and an elk bugling your highest note.
This melody of the West
thickens mountain blood in my veins.

--For "Purty Jan Dell"

STACKING HAY BALES FOR THE OLD WISCONSIN FARMER

Shredded twine, bristly as pig hair,
blisters and rips my finger pits.
I knee the green bales into place,
snug as corn kernels in their cob.
Yank them from the iron claws,
the elevator rattles.

Every pore dribbles last night's beer.
Hayseeds stick to three day's growth
like woodticks in a dog's ear.
My arms itch with hayseed rash,
my lungs decay with ancient dust
and flies fight the tiny four-paned window.
The loft hasn't breathed for years.

BLUE LUCK AND MUSIC ON LONESOME LAKE

When the sun slips between the hills
a coin slides into a juke box,
the horizon lights up in purples
like an old Wurlitzer,
and a grouse drums in the bugleweed.

You feather the oars, wing
through the arrowhead. Blackbirds flutter
over their nests like caddis flies
after a hatch. We cast hackles
and our Nighthawks confuse the bats.

We bounce greenjacks in the shallows,
minnows where smallmouths fantail their beds,
spawn on a gravel bottom. Try weedless hooks,
a porkrind in the prehistoric roots
of lily pads, worms around the snags.

Tonight the lake is a mirror
that breaks when the beaver slaps his tail,
and the loon laughs his lunatic laugh
at seven years of bad luck and bait,
at everything we throw under a full moon.

Tonight largemouths, fat as planets, yawn
among the logs. You try a Jitterbug.
Crickets screech like a phonograph needle
on a bad record. A Hula Popper, a jig.
All the bass are heavy sleepers.

The bass are heavy sleepers,
our last coffee purls from the Thermos,
and the inlet steams where it meets the lake.
Once you hooked a lunker here on a frog
I found sunning on a silver dollar.

--For My Father

TAKE-HOME PAY

Muscles shimmer like wet road
on a moon-lit night. Every hair curls,
a patch of black fiddleheads on my chest,
and sweat blisters when it hits the mix.

The paver lays a hot lane
down U.S. 51 to Hurley,
a hundred and twenty without the sun
and I don't get paid to piss.

All day I steep in fumes,
a hearth of fuel oil and hot tar.
My skin becomes the road I drive
home after dark.

And when the moon cools off the job,
I burn in dreams between the sheets
and my sweat beads
a cold sheen out on the blacktop.

GRAVEYARD SHIFT AT BONNER MILL

Pitch glistens on the pine like sweat
and the white-faced logs roll
slow, cattle that sense the butcher,
the smell of fresh-cut bone.

A quarter moon sinks a keen edge
into a clear-cut mountain,
and the only stars are sawdust
your crosscut sprays against the dark.

The only hope, the neon at Harold's
Milltown Bar, Hugo's poems preserved
there forever under glass,
like the bighorn and the billy.

There hours fester in your head,
too much caffeine, tobacco juice,
the peaveys that stab your flesh
in bad dreams you have all day.

This work is meant for bitter nights,
when the Blackfoot floats your shadows
far down stream,
and a nighthawk is the only witness.

BLUE-RIBBON MOONS

ZARZYSKI, NOT EXACTLY WILD BILL HICKOK

Forty-seven time my shotgun thundered,
a downpour of BB's riddles the sloughs.
I wade knee-deep in Winchester hulls,
red as rose hips and my cheeks.
Smokey the retriever pants
at my cursing and fist-shaking.
Forty-seven gossip blue bills
vanish like words into a strong wind,
spreading tales from Saskatchewan
down the Mississippi flyway to New Orleans:

That quack Zarzyski
couldn't pepper a duck
if the son-of-a-bitch was in the oven.

ZARZYSKI MEETS THE COPENHAGEN ANGEL

Her Levis, so tight
I can read the dates on coins
in her hip pocket. Miles City,
a rodeo Saturday night.
She smiles from a corner bar stool,
her taut lower lip, white and puffed,
pigtails braided like bronc reins.
She leads the circuit chasing cans,
a barrel racer in love with her horse
and a 16 second time.
We dance to "Daydream Cowboy."
I'm Zarzyski, I tell her,
a lover, a fighter, a bareback bronc rider.
And these Copenhagen kisses jump and kick
higher than old Moonshine, himself.

ZARZYSKI AT DEEP CREEK BAR RENDEZVOUS

(Forest Closing, August 19-27, 1973)

Hard hats palavering over boiler makers
say bear are moving down for chokecherries,
rattlesnake up for water.
So dry, the creek trickles
only three days a week,
and a logger's fart is dangerous
as a smouldering match.
Rumors flare faster than fires.
A girl kidnapped at Three Forks
found split, like a lightning-struck pine,
a grizzly on LSD in Yellowstone
has shredded three hippies to death.

At the cabin, pack rats stampede
the roof, scattering
everything shiny to hidden lairs.
No moon, no stars, no fire,
my imagination glitters in the dark.

ZARZYSKI'S TURTLE SOUP

1

Tease its hooked nose until it snaps,
clamps jaws on the stick
forever. Stretch neck over the block
and hack with your ax.
Hang by tail to bleed.

2

Slice around the breastplate,
lift the lid,
like opening a tin can.
Sandbags, stomach, heart, lungs, eggs--
empty out the contents.

3

Boil skinned legs and neck
until meat slips from bone.
Then throw away the soup
eat the kettle and dream,
its black heart still pumping in the weeds.

ZARZYKI AT HIS FIRST RODEO, ROOTS FOR THE STOCK

In Roundup Montana
toothless cowboys with bowed legs
dig spurs deep into horsehide,
twist the steer's neck 180 degrees,
and hog-tie snared whiteface calves.

It's no wonder
cows boo the national anthem.

ZARZYSKI CURSES IZAAK WALTON FOR ALL HIS ROTTEN LUCK

Damn you anyway, Izaak!
What in hell did I do to deserve this?
I've read your Compleat Angler 13 times
and was angled out of 13 days wages
for all this gear.
Your line of instructions
I swallowed from brown bomber mosquito
through 30 yards of double taper!
So why does this snow-cold river
spill over the tops of my breast waders?
Why are hundreds of fly-tying hours
tangled into bird's-nest
branches too high to reach?
Why do you knot my leader on ever backcast?
And why do you attack me
with squadrons of spitfire mosquitos
and no-see-um kamikazes?
Are these the bites you promised?
One suicidal trout
depressed with its stuntedness,
too retarded to see this snarled leader
that you refuse to sink!
Is this the hearty feast you spoke of?
This fry would sizzle to a speck
no bigger than a number 14 black gnat...
and then I'll bet
you'd fish me from this earth,
hooked in the throat by a minnow bone!
Damn you anyway, Izaak!

ZARZYSKI'S FUTILE LOVE
WITH THE FARMER'S RICH CITY DAUGHTER

To her father's smoggy nostrils
cow manure was perfume.
She said it smelled like shit!
And the spring fields of oats and pastures,
green and crisp, reminded her of hundred-dollar bills.
I showed her forests in bloom with trilliums,
wild rose and strawberry blossoms,
but they were full of biting bees and bears.
And our calm, clear nights,
those blue-ribbon moons in a Milky Way sky?
Nothin' she'd say, to a neon galaxy
and flashy cars cruising the strip.
We got beer bars, townhall dances too.
But martinis and swinging discotheques had class.
And what about the hayloft on Sunday afternoons?
"Motel suites and clean sheets," she said,
"No more hayseed rash for me!"
"So go to hell then," I told her.
And she went back to chicago!

--For Mary Jo

ZARZYSKI BLASTED IN JACKSON HOLE, WYOMING

Through two shots of red-eye,
the moon looks like a plugged nickel.
Country-western music spurts
from swinging saloon doors,
gallops over the foothills
and ricochets like bullets off the Tetons.
The neon at Dirty Jack's Theater
flickers "The Ballad of Cat Ballou".
Cat Ballou Zarzyski!
I stagger from saloon to saloon
like I'm dodging piles of horseshit,
my free hand ready at my side
to quick-draw a crooked finger
at some unsuspecting tourist.

The Jackalope, pink-eyed
from Marlboro and Winchester smoke,
becomes more real with every shot.
Bartender,
pour me another snowshoe.